

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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protection of yearling bulls appears to improve herd productivity in some areas.

The first branch antlered bull units were initiated in 1982. Since that time, additional branched antler units have been identified and in 1987 we had 29 units. All but two branched antler units are in western Washington.

#### ROAD MANAGEMENT (LIMITED VEHICLE ACCESS)

Over the last couple of decades, there has been a several hundred-fold increase in public road access on federal, state, and industrial forest lands. More hunters can get more places every year, leaving animals with less escape cover — where the animals have an edge on the hunters. A whole generation of hunters has grown up with this option and many have come to believe that better opportunity is the end result of additional road access. Some new hunters may never have even experienced off road hunting. The change has been so gradual that many may not realize the impacts on the sport, the animals, or the land. The bottom line, however, has been more restrictive hunting regulations, less hunting freedom and opportunity, fewer mature bulls and bucks, and an adversely affected recreation industry. As road densities increase, hunter opportunity actually decreases due to the need for additional and more restrictive hunting regulations. These include shorter seasons, permits, lower bag limits, fewer either sex seasons, and selection of area and weapons. The end result is less hunter satisfaction, less hunter opportunity, and a hunting experience that many find to be low in quality.

Habitat is the ultimate measure of how many animals can live in an area. As either quantity or quality drops, so does the number of animals in the vicinity. Intensively managed forests may have open road densities ranging from three to nine miles of road for each square mile of habitat. For each mile of road, at least four acres are directly removed from productive habitat. In addition, although some elk and deer will use areas next to road traffic, most will not. Studies in Washington, Oregon and elsewhere in the Northwest have shown that big game animals avoided active roads by at least one-quarter mile, and some moved as much as four miles in response to traffic. Road densities greater than five miles per square mile of habitat can almost eliminate elk use of an area.

The acreage covered by roads (especially those with paved or gravelled surfaces) provides neither forage nor protective cover for wildlife. When roadsides are seeded and traffic is reduced, the areas often provide valuable forage. Roads which are closed to vehicular traffic do not result in significant disturbance of wildlife.

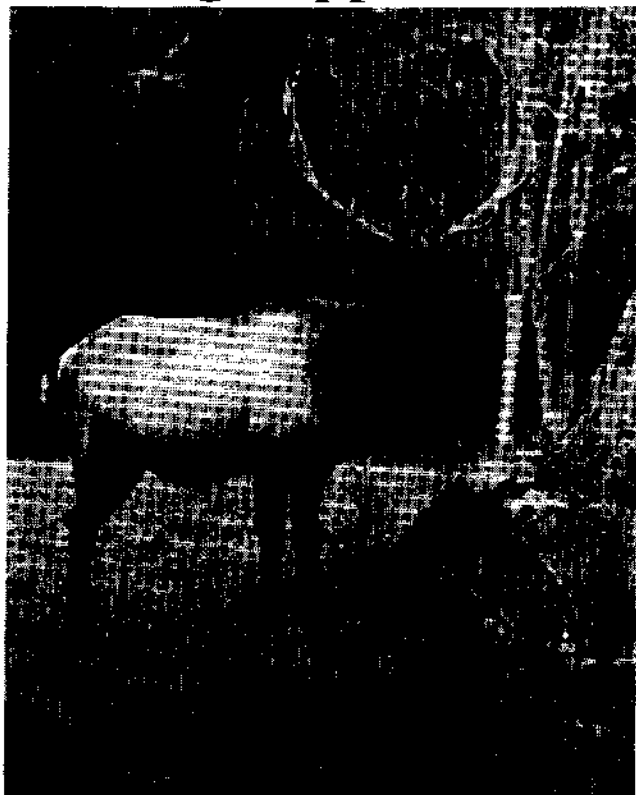
Vehicle access programs are designed to satisfy a number of objectives but the most common objective is simply to reduce disturbance. Some road management programs are designed to provide quality recreation but others are to improve herd structure, reduce poaching and/or reduce landowner/sportsmen conflicts.

About half of the road management programs are road closures during hunting seasons. These closures reduce hunter crowding and enhance bull escapement. This in turn leads to increased trophy animals and quality hunting opportunity. Many of the remaining vehicle access programs are year round but some vehicle access areas are closed only during critical seasons, i.e. calving seasons.

The Department has a goal of implementing some type of road management program in 10-15% of the commercial forest land base in Washington. So far, about 8% of commercial forests or 900,000 acres of land are in a vehicular access program. Road management programs are producing quality hunting opportunities and public opinion surveys show they are popular with most hunters.

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# Quality Elk Hunting Opportunities



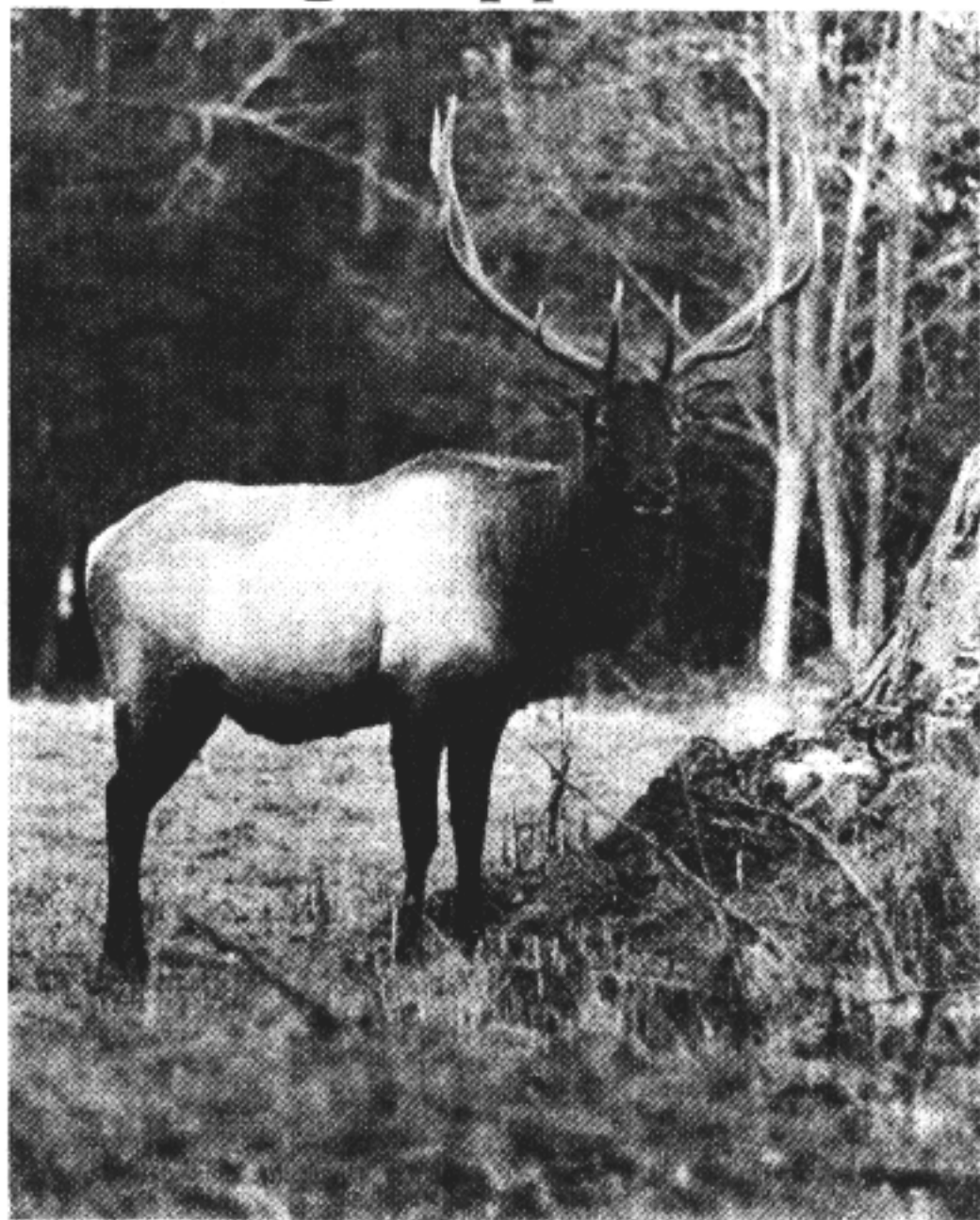
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wildlife and people—  
now and in the  
future.



# Quality Elk Hunting Opportunities



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In the last few years, the Washington Department of Wildlife has made major changes in hunting seasons to provide quality hunting opportunities. The Department solicited hunter desires from sportsmen through monthly meetings and public opinion surveys. Some hunters wanted bigger bulls, others wanted less crowded hunting and others wanted more meat in the freezer. It became evident that sportsmen have a variety of opinions about quality. The perception of quality differ widely from one person to another. The Department and Wildlife Commission responded to these quality desires by providing a variety of opportunities so the hunter could choose the type of hunting experience desired.

### LIMITED ENTRY

One aspect of quality management in Washington is limited entry hunts. The eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980 led to the closure of one of the most popular elk hunting areas in the state. The Mt. St. Helens area was closed to hunting during the mountain's unstable two years following eruption. The eruption created a blast zone of 150,000 acres. In addition, a debris slide of pumice and ash was seeded and fertilized to prevent erosion and provide forage for wildlife. This area, devoid of forest cover, attracted over a hundred elk from surrounding areas.

Because of the extreme visibility in the blast zone, very conservative seasons were recommended when hunting was resumed in 1982. While some elk were killed in the 1980 eruption, recovery was rapid with excellent productivity. The two year closure protected bulls for the two years and dramatically changed the age composition of bull elk. Prior to 1980, fall post season surveys revealed one to two bulls per 100 cows and very few branch antlered bulls. In 1983, bull ratios increased to 60 per 100 cows and 53% of the bulls were branched antlered. A limited entry season was initiated in two units in the Mt. St. Helens area to retain the diverse age structure and provide quality hunting opportunity. Public response to these seasons has been favorable.

In the last few years other areas where hunting pressure was excessive have been restricted to permit only hunting. Some areas have limited opportunity for large branched antler bulls during the rut. This past year six units with a total of 60 permits were open in early October for five point and larger bulls. In some cases, units adjacent to national park reserves were open to early permit only hunts to provide an opportunity not previously available. In addition, a couple of watersheds

that were previously off limits to hunting have been opened to hunting on a limited permit basis.

The limited entry seasons adopted in Washington will provide a genuine trophy hunting opportunity. Unlike the branched antler only restrictions, which tend to crop bulls a year or two older, limiting hunter numbers allowed for a mixed age distribution and enables some bulls to reach trophy size.

The disadvantage of limited entry programs is that hunters are further constricted on the remaining elk range. If excessive limited entry units are added, either hunting quality deteriorates beyond acceptable limits in the remainder of the state or all units will have to be restricted to permit only hunting as well. We believe we have the right number of limited entry units at the present time.

### BRANCHED ANTLER SEASONS

The most popular management change to provide quality hunting is branched antler seasons. The department has implemented branched antler hunts in some situations to satisfy hunter desires for branched antler hunts but in other areas branched antler seasons have been initiated to improve herd productivity.

Historically, elk hunting regulations in Washington have been any bull seasons. The high hunter pressure has resulted in heavy cropping of bulls and resultant low bull escapement. In the 1970's and early 1980's, post season elk surveys revealed only about five or six bulls per 100 cows. Some hunters expressed the desire for some larger bulls even if it meant fewer legal bulls available each year. Some of the branched antler hunts have resulted in better bull escapement and accommodated this hunter desire.

In western Washington, vegetation has poorer nutritional content than in the eastern part of the state. Research studies indicate that nutrition affects yearling bull maturity and in areas of poor nutrition, yearling males do not reach sexual maturity until the cow's second or third heat cycle. Cows that are bred late produce late calves that have a poorer chance for survival in their first winter. In areas where elk security is good and sufficient mature bulls are available to breed the cows, this is not a problem. In many areas of western Washington, however, security is not adequate and insufficient mature bulls are available to breed all the cows in their first heat cycle. The



